

# JPL testing for soil contamination

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## Lab is on Superfund priority list to clean polluted groundwater

By Tanla Soussan  
STAFF WRITER

The Jet Propulsion Laboratory is drilling four test wells in Altadena neighborhoods and a fifth in Oak Grove Park to assess the level of groundwater contamination in the area.

The 400-foot to 500-foot deep test wells are part of the lab's efforts to determine the extent of contamination and develop a cleanup plan.

JPL was placed on the Superfund National Priority List in 1993 and must clean up polluted soil and groundwater.

NASA, which is funded by the federal government, is paying for the testing and cleanup. The cost of drilling the wells is about \$2 million, lab officials said.

"We're still in what's called the remedial investigation phase of the Superfund process," said Charles Buri, manager of JPL's environmental affairs office. "That's basically going out and taking samples to see if the contamination exists and whether JPL is responsible."

There are wells being dug on Harriet Street near Casitas Avenue, near the intersection of Lincoln Avenue and West Altadena Drive, near the intersection of Lincoln and Ventura Street, and on city property at the Windsor Reservoir. The fifth well is in Pasadena's Oak Grove Park.

JPL, which is managed by Caltech, now builds robotic space probes for the National Aeronautics and Space Admin-

istration.

However, in the 1940s and '50s, the facility was operated by the Army. Workers poured chemicals such as freon, mercury, rocket fuel and sulfuric acid down sinks that drained into cesspools around the lab — a common practice at the time.

Officials at JPL and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency believe those chemicals seeped into the soil and eventually into the groundwater.

The EPA estimates that about 68,000 people obtain drinking water from municipal wells within four miles of the lab.

In 1980, chemical solvents were found in at least four Pasadena city wells around the arroyo, and four wells eventually were shut down temporarily. In 1990, JPL paid for a temporary water treatment plant that the city now uses to clean drinking water. Lincoln Avenue Water Co., which serves Altadena, shut down two wells in 1987.

Underground water generally flows from JPL to the south and southeast and under the Arroyo Seco. The test wells have been placed along that path. There are also test wells on JPL property.

"Based on the levels of contamination, they'll decide whether it's necessary to clean the ground water and how to do it," said Brian Swarthout, project manager for the EPA, which oversees the cleanup process.

Tests of soil at various sites on lab property have turned up no contamination so far, Swarth-



Staff photo by WALT MANCINI

**HOOKING UP** a reverse circulation hose, JPL crews work at a drill site in Pasadena.

thout said.

"What it looks like they have is on-site and off-site groundwater contamination and not really any onsite soil contamination," he said.

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JPL is expected to turn in reports to the EPA by year's end, outlining the extent of contamination and how to clean it up.

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